

Olympia Snowe

1947–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE, 1979–1995

UNITED STATES SENATOR, 1995–

REPUBLICAN FROM MAINE



Image courtesy of the Member

AS THE FIRST GREEK-AMERICAN WOMAN and one of the youngest women ever elected to Congress, Olympia Snowe has represented Maine for 27 years—16 as a U.S. House Member and two terms as a U.S. Senator. A fitting representative for her politically independent Maine constituents, Snowe has balanced her Republican loyalties, personal convictions, and the needs of her rural state. In 2003, Senator Snowe was appointed chair of the Small Business Committee, becoming one of five women in history to head a standing Senate committee.

Olympia Jean Bouchles was born on February 21, 1947, in Augusta, Maine, daughter of George and Georgia Bouchles. Her parents both passed away before her 10th birthday, and Olympia Bouchles was raised by an aunt and uncle in Auburn, Maine. She earned a B.A. in political science from the University of Maine at Orono, and married state representative Peter Snowe in 1969. Four years later, Snowe died in a car accident. At the urging of the Maine Republican officials, Olympia Snowe ran successfully for her husband's vacant seat. She won a full term in 1974 and was elected to an open state senate seat in 1976.

In 1978, when Republican Congressman William Cohen vacated his U.S. House seat, Snowe entered the race to succeed him. The district, one of two in Maine, covered the rural northern two-thirds of the state. Snowe's principal opponent was Democrat Markham Gartley, Maine's secretary of state. With a moderate platform, Snowe prevailed with 51 percent of the vote to Gartley's 41 percent, for the first of eight consecutive terms in the House.¹

When Representative Snowe took her seat in the 96th Congress (1979–1981), she received assignments on three committees: Government Operations, Small Business, and the Select Committee on Aging. Two years later she earned a seat on the Foreign Affairs Committee—where she remained for the balance of her House career. In the 98th Congress (1983–1985), after leaving her Small Business post, Snowe was assigned to the Joint Economic Committee, where she remained until her final House term, when she won a seat on the Budget Committee.

Representative Snowe's moderation and willingness to compromise won her bipartisan respect. Recognized as a loyal Republican (she was named a GOP deputy whip in 1984) she also demonstrated her independence.² From her position on the Small Business Committee, she favored trade protection, contrasting with the Reagan administration's free trade policies, in order to protect exporters in her district.³ As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Congresswoman Snowe supported a nuclear armaments freeze, aid for Nicaraguan rebels, and sanctions against South Africa to protest that nation's apartheid system.⁴ Snowe served on the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues for her entire House career, chairing it during the 98th Congress, fighting for the 1980 Economic Equity Act, and consistently supporting women's reproductive rights.⁵ In 1989, Olympia Snowe married Maine Republican Governor John McKernan, Jr., a former House Member.

In 1994, when Democratic Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell of Maine announced his retirement, Snowe declared her candidacy for the open seat.⁶ In the general election, she faced two-term Representative Thomas Andrews from southeastern Maine. Snowe's well-organized campaign and House experience helped her prevail with 60 percent of the vote. In 2000, she won re-election with 69 percent.⁷

Senator Snowe's initial committee assignments—Budget; Foreign Relations; Small Business; and Commerce, Science, and Transportation—reflected her House expertise. She later served on the Armed Services Committee and, in 2000, left the Budget Committee to join the powerful Finance Committee. In the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Snowe also joined the Select Intelligence Committee and, in addition to chairing Small Business, served as chair of the Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Fisheries and Coast Guard.

Senator Snowe's Senate agenda has featured many of the legislative priorities she set as a Representative. Snowe sought funding for affordable health care, particularly for small businesses, as well as expanded drug coverage for seniors under Medicare. She remains a champion of women's issues, calling for easier access to contraceptives as well as better medical care for mastectomy patients. Senator Snowe also has been a proponent for a cleaner environment, advocating better gas mileage for sport utility vehicles and protections for Maine's fishing industry. She has fought to restore funding for a job training center and continued U.S. Navy presence in Kittery, Maine. From her position as co-chair of the Senate Centrist Coalition, a bipartisan group of consensus builders, she helped write an amendment to major campaign finance reforms convincing reluctant colleagues to support the legislation.⁸

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Olympia Jean Snowe," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

Mikulski, Barbara, et al. *Nine and Counting: The Women of the Senate*. (New York: Morrow, 2000).

NOTES

1 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>. *Current Biography*, 1995 (New York: H.W. Wilson and Company, 1995): 543–544.

2 *Current Biography*, 1995: 545.

3 *Current Biography*, 1995: 546; John E. Yang, "House Upholds Reagan's Veto Of Trade Limits," 7 August 1986, *Wall Street Journal*: 5.

4 Douglas C. Waller, *Congress and the Nuclear Freeze* (University of Massachusetts Press: 1987): 116; *Current Biography*, 1995: 545; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Arming Managua," 16 June 1986, *Washington Post*: A11.

5 *Current Biography*, 1995: 545.

6 "Mitchell Leaving Bewilderment in His Wake," 7 March 1994, *USA Today*: 4A.

7 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.

8 Mary Agnes Cary, "Sen. Olympia J. Snowe," 28 December 2002, *CQ Weekly*: 35; *Politics in America*, 2004 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 447–448; Thomas Fields-Meyer et al., "Survival Skills" 18 June 2001, *People*: 121.